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Always Already Playing:

Hermeneutics and the Gamification of Existence

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Gamification – Concepts, Practices, Critiques

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Abstract

What if play is more than just an attitude or set of behaviors? What if the world is fundamentally and inherently playful? What if, when we find ourselves playing, we are not the authors or agents who initiate the activity, but instead we are giving ourselves over to the play of the world, being-played as it were? In this essay, we consider these questions in reference to the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, discussing the work of Gadamer and others and tracing out the implications for gamification research.

What works? What plays?

The phenomenon of ‘play’ has been juxtaposed by organizational researchers to the behaviors and intentions traditionally associated with ‘work’. Organizational researchers have focused on play as mode of intentionality or action that can be associated with such nominally positive effects as the feeling of flow or timelessness (Mainemelis & Altman, 2010) and continuous learning (Statler, Roos & Victor, 2009), as well as ambivalent effects such as usurpation (Sorenson & Spoelstra, 2012). Negative implications and effects of play including manipulation and exploitation have also been critically identified (Andersen, 2009; Costea et al., 2005; Hunter et al., 2010; Styhre, 2008). Scholars have focused on empirical contexts such as strategy processes (Roos et al, 2004), scenario planning (Jacobs & Statler, 2006), and innovation and creativity processes (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), as well as on emerging organizational practices that involve the gamification of basic tasks (e.g., Hamari, 2013; Werbach & Hunter, 2012), service designs (Huotari & Hamari, 2017), and crowdsourcing strategies (Morschheuser et al., 2017).

But whereas the term play has been used somewhat interchangeably with the term game by organizational researchers to refer to non-instrumental (Trittin et al, this issue) or autotelic (Statler et al, 2009) activities, the relatively more specific phenomenon of gamification has been generally understood in this context to describe situations in which organizations add game-like elements to existing non-game systems (Deterding et al, 2011). Examples include counting points or offering badges on a leaderboard, or scripting a narrative with sounds and visuals that keep ‘participants’ (e.g., those dealing with the task) engaged. Yet as with play, alongside the positive or productive effects of

such approaches scholars have also warned against the unethical results of using gamification for business purposes that do not align with benefits for the players or employees. For example, the gamification of an intrinsically motivated task may “create unwanted competition between people where a productive collaboration already existed” (Hamari & Morschheuser, this issue). While gamification may increase people’s enthusiasm for completing a task, it may oversimplify and trivialize the complexity of grand challenges (Trittin et al. this issue). Landers (this issue) pays attention to the risk of “fake” gamification, in which game elements are employed to support user engagement, yet with little consideration on the psychological effects the game-elements may produce.

Our contribution to this discourse is here to raise the question: what if play could be considered as an aspect of the world that surrounds us? What if play were not merely a behavior, or an intentional attitude, but a fundamental aspect of our existence? These questions have not yet been considered or advanced within the organizational research on play, games or gamification. As a way to begin exploring those questions, in the following section of this essay we present a hermeneutic perspective on play.

Hermeneutics and play ontology

In his major opus *Truth and Method* (2004), the key figure of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) describes the human ontological condition – including how we exist in and relate to the world – in terms of play. To illustrate what is meant by play, Gadamer refers to phenomena such as the movement of waves, light or fire that form through an undefined coming and going, a movement of back-and-forth. This kind of play not only contributes to the existence of the phenomenon in question (fire, waves, light), but it elementarily becomes and is maintained only in

movement, in doing and practicing. Play is the back-and-forth movement that constitutes the phenomenon. In Gadamer's work play is associated not only with motivations, behaviors, or intentions, but with existence as such. In this sense, he develops a play ontology.

Gadamer's interest in play is derived from the work of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who, based on his work on various cultures, in *Homo Ludens* (1950) argues for a non-differentiation between being and playing. This leads to a "primacy of play over the consciousness of the player", Gadamer (2004, p. 105) concludes. The interesting twist that Gadamer's concept gives to play is that the movements of waves, fire and light are not defined by the subjectivity of the player. Rather, the player becomes submerged with the play: "all playing is being-played" (Gadamer, 2004: 106). Play in this respect is not synonymous to a game, but an ontological construct of being-played. To further define play, Gadamer (2004) asserts that he wants to free the concept of play of the "subjective meaning" (p. 102) it has traditionally had: "When we speak of play (...), this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying [the phenomenon], nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the [phenomenon] itself" (p. 102).

Play, in this conceptualization, is not only about the player's experiences and motivations, or about the intentions of the managers or designers of the now-gamified work task. Being-played does not primarily refer to such organizational or psychological concerns, but to the way in which we are *always already playing*. The activity in which people play, or work tasks are gamified, takes place in a world that is fundamentally playful, and to which we are already connected in an ontologically primary way.

Moreover, instead of individual subjects and objects, the play ontology focuses on what-is-playing, on the phenomenon that becomes in the back-and-forth movement between the player and what-is-playing. Referring to this play, Günter Figal (2010) has recently put more weight on an epistemological stance that he calls “objectivity”. Considering the fact that hermeneutics has been stamped in organization studies as a qualitative methodology involving interpretation and subjectivity (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), the term ‘objectivity’ may sound like a controversial formulation. Yet the German word Figal originally uses, *Gegenständlichkeit*, thing-ness, is literally translated as “what stands over against, what is across from and remains standing across from” (Figal, 2010: 107). Whether it is a table or a video game, the matter we refer to is shared collectively, either by observing the same stimuli or by being present in the same space or through a virtual connection. Despite various interpretations, objectivity refers a point of reference that sustains and withstands. The experience of *Gegenständlichkeit* is that of something opposing oneself.

But since this situation involves neither just an entity or an object, the epistemological challenge of play movement stresses the importance of keeping that-which-stands-against-us moving and *alive*. This challenge is familiar to artists who use releasement and meditative thinking as a regular part of their practice. Cézanne, for instance, “spent hours before his subject, pausing, without coming to any rash conclusion. (...) This is no failure, however, but rather respect in the face of objectivity” (Figal, 2010: 115). In Gadamer’s terms, the painter knows to be-played by the environment. This requires approaching the environment one wants to study with “no expectation, no interest, and also no need, thus also no initially searching, then fixed, view” (Figal, 2010,

p. 114). For instance an encounter with art requires dwelling, tarrying (Dostal, 2002: 250), which results in the work becoming present in a processual, playful (back-and-forth) fashion.

Another way Gadamer describes this playful movement is in terms of conversation. In conversation we become involved with our environment and with the other. While “no one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation”, “it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists” (Gadamer, 2004: 385). Conversation does not refer to dialogue partners or text interpretation (as play does not refer to players or game either), but to the matter at hand and to “doing of the thing itself” (Figal, 2002). A player of a game is, in these terms, in a conversation with the game. He cannot fundamentally change the game, or impose his terms on the game, but he can join in it. Conceptualized in terms of conversation, play appears as something fundamentally processual, open-ended and non-instrumental.

Implications for research on gamification in organizations

To our knowledge, this hermeneutic conceptualization of play at an ontological level has not yet been integrated into organization studies focused on play, games and gamification. We believe that it has several important implications however, including a broadening of empirical focus, an intensification of critique, and an emphasis on reflexivity in research methods.

Broadening of empirical focus

If play refers to an ontological mode of existence, then the term ‘gamification’ can refer to any organizational situation in which open-ended, non-instrumental ‘conversations’ occur between and among people and their environment. In this sense, the range of relevant phenomena is very broad, including many diverse organizational and institutional forms, etc. All schemes, games, calculations, risk hedges, etc. re-appear as potentially playful engagements that are actualized or performed in and through physical, material embodiments and environments.

In this issue, Hamari (2018) discusses how companies increasingly use *crowdsourcing* for tasks that can be fulfilled in a more cost-efficiently in an outsourced fashion than keeping the resources tied to fixed workforce. As the number of tasks and crowdsourcers fluctuates – the tasks are added and completed, and these keep coming from various sources and going into directions that were not defined in advance – the crowdsourcing machine – an algorithm – pulsates back and forth. From a hermeneutic perspective, we can see this as a play movement, a constant yet undefined movement that circulates and maintains operations. As Hamari notes, companies can seek to make this machinery more attracting by adding traditional game-like elements.

By adopting a play ontology, research on organizational gamification may yield insights relevant not just to the enhancement of crowdsourcing techniques through the addition of game-design elements, but to all aspects of business practice, including the core disciplines of management, accounting, marketing, finance, information systems, human resources, etc. Gamification, viewed ontologically, provides a lens through which to consider how we are being-played by systems and structures around us.

b) Intensification of critique

Within this newly broadened range of organizational phenomena that may be considered in terms of gamification, many of the specific activities that have been critiqued because of their manipulative or exploitative tendencies appear as particularly un-playful. In this sense, we join the chorus of other authors in this special issue: gamification should be seen as something much more than just the instrumental masking of work tasks as games. We take the critique a step further and insist that any work task, whether sugar-coated as a game or not, should be seen as unethical if it constrains the human capacity to engage in playful conversation with others and the environment.

Trittin et al. (2018) note the manipulative side of gamification, as it can be used also to attract players to play, and be incentivized, into unethical directions. They criticize this usage by formulating that “play is an inherently non-instrumental activity. It is, per definition, an end in itself”. This formulation aligns with Gadamer’s definition of play as unintentional, non-directed movement. Trittin et al. (2018) further observe that gamifying for instance corruption in an organization may lead an employee to regard the issue as related to individuals instead of seeing it as a structural problem, and thus create a false sense of agency. This, too, is in line with Gadamer’s concept of being-played.

But beyond just collecting badges or creating virtual competition between participating teams, applying hermeneutic vocabulary one can say that the universe plays. Since we are part of the universe, we are already always playing and being-played. But forcing someone into a point-winning scheme dramatically restricts the range of possibilities for playful engagement. Making someone see things in an abstract ‘winning’ formulation implies a transformation of the physical materiality of the world

into immaterial game-elements. This enforced perspective neglects the actual ongoing engagement with colleagues, as their materiality and that of the environment is transformed into abstract points. In this sense, we agree with Landers (this issue) that many organizational attempts to gamify work tasks are ultimately fake and counter-productive. And yet beyond that, the hermeneutic concept of play reminds us that acknowledging things in their objectivity involves an ethics of appreciating the materiality of the world as well as the intrinsic value it bears simply by virtue of its existence. In this sense, we believe that what Landers calls 'legitimate' gamification should be held to a high ethical standard that involves allowing the playful engagement with the world to continue rather than shutting it down or constraining it in the instrumental service of managerial objectives.

c) Emphasis on reflexive research methods

A play ontology allows us to understand the flow of movements from within, not to join or observe the 'thing-movement' from somewhere external or without (Shotter, 2006). To the extent that anyone seeking to understand a playful activity or process can do so, following Gadamer and Figal, only by joining in the process, then organizational researchers can re-frame their efforts to understand gamification reflexively as *an engagement in gamification*.

Seen from this perspective, in joining a group, chat, or organization we become 'us', not 'me'. When one is conscious about the play (ontology) one joins, one experiences of belonging and co-construction in the act of joining. Right now, in writing this article, we, as authors, belong to a scientific community co-constructing the topic of

gamification – for future readers to join us. We are engaged in the same process together. In a strict Gadamerian sense, this article exists only when it is read and a back-and-forth play movement between the text and reader is enabled. What the reader makes out of it cannot be determined by the authors, since both the writers and readers are being-played by the larger context of gamification in its historical, societal and environmental contexts.

Arjoranta (2014) makes a case for the player being immersed in the game by her/his actions and language use. The same goes for intensive video games, where the player becomes absorbed by the game. And the same goes for organizational research, where the researchers become absorbed in the research. This effect of Gadamerian being-played is felt at the other end of the spectrum too: once the player has fully mastered the game, it becomes boring. But when the game draws the player in, and the player tries to win/solve/advance, s/he is embedded in the game. In interactive games the experience of being-played is even more obvious: one cannot really anticipate or predict what happens next. So too with organization studies.

In closing, we recall that the “principal concern of hermeneutical philosophers is not to establish unalterable truths, firm foundations, or certitudes, but rather to elucidate the terms of human life as it is actually lived’ and to inquire into ‘our living relations with things’” (George, 2012: 18-19). We hope that this essay has elucidated gamification as a potentially playful mode of relation with people and things in the world.

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